
Athletes Need Both Fat and Carbohydrates

One of an athlete's favorite beliefs - fat is bad food, carbohydrates is good - needs to be reexamined in light of facts, according to the Penn State Sports Medicine Newsletter.

"A lot of athletes have the idea that fat is a poor nutrient and feel almost superior if they survive on a fat-free diet," says Dr. Kristine L. Clark, Ph.D., R.D., a member of the newsletter's editorial board.

"In reality, fat is an essential nutrient," notes Clark, coordinator of the sports nutrition program for Penn State varsity athletes. "If you don't eat some fat, there is a good possibility that total calories will be inadequate. Just as many athletes over-consume carbohydrates, they under-consume fats."

Athletes are told continually that 55 to 60 percent of their calories should come from carbohydrates, meaning starchy carbohydrates such as bread and cereals. However, they fail to realize that carbohydrates also occur in fruits, vegetables and dairy products, and thus they consume more starches than they should.

Athletes also put too much stock in dietary supplements while at the same time overlooking the nutritional value of red meat," Clark told the newsletter. "Supplements may be appropriate but, if an athlete is not getting 100 percent of the Recommended Dietary Allowance for certain food groups, substances such as ginseng, herbs, creatine, and protein supplements are simply not necessary for good nutrition to enhance performance."

Furthermore, athletes make the mistake of not consuming enough fluids. In addition, they need to remember to eat a balanced meal about four hours before competition and a pre-game snack one hour before.

"Finally, athletes should not wait too long after a game to eat," Clark adds. "They should take in carbohydrate-rich foods within two hours after intense exercise. It doesn't matter whether you take in solids or liquids. After exercise, athletes can eat almost anything they want. Sports drinks and juices are beneficial for rehydration as well as providing carbohydrates."

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